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Military Airport Conversions: When The Ex-Base Becomes Your Place

- The size and nature of military aviation activities since the beginning of the Cold War created facilities with huge superadequacies for most civil applications.
- The airport element of ex-military bases is generally the most problematical portion of the property when it comes to adaptive reuse.
- Airside improvements (i.e. hangars) built for military specifications are hard to fully utilize.
- Once the facility is converted to civilian use, maintaining the minimal amount of apron, taxiway and runways as practical is the most cost effective operational strategy.
- The "all cargo" or "industrial" airport still works better as a theory than a reality. Military bases and airports are like any other income producing real estate - they work best when they are either pre-sold or pre-leased.

The end of the Cold War and the restructuring of the U.S. Military has brought with it a number of base closings which have provided some communities with the equivalent of a nine billion pound gorilla. Military bases are good for the aviation community because a facility which was once closed to public use becomes available. The process by which a base becomes an airport (and other civilian real estate) is complicated and difficult.

One of my favorite appraisal business words is "superadequacy". A superadequacy is an "excess in capacity or quality of a structure". In the case of a military base, this pertains to just about everything on it. The smallest runways are no shorter than approximately 6,000 feet. Some have runways of over 2 miles. They're often wide, too. The Boeing B-52 requires runway widths of over 200 feet to adequately support it. In a nutshell, an ex-military base contains massive amounts of asphalt, concrete and other elements which are mostly initially unusable by civil aviation.

Military bases consist of other elements besides runways and airside property. Often there is potentially prime retail land, commercial buildings which are candidates for adaptive reuse, and tracts of land which could be used to support commercial and industrial development. The adaptive reuse or redeployment of nonaeronautical land can be the easier part of base conversion.

The biggest problem facing the airport portion of the site is what, if any, aviation market exists for the facility. Since bases are generally conveyed under conditions similar to the Surplus Property Act of 1946, the entity which assumes sponsorship for the base agrees to operate a public airport. This imposes financial burdens. In some cases, there isn't an



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immediate market which can fully support the airport, and the facility must be nursed through a gestation period which can produce a wide gap between revenues and expenses.

Military hangars are often built beyond the physical needs of the civil aircraft which will immediately occupy them. Additionally, military buildings often contain other problems such as asbestos in the construction; Rube Goldberg configurations; odd-ball construction materials and really nasty wear and tear.

The best way to maintain financial and operational viability while waiting for the demand to catch up is to shrink the airport as small as possible and maintain the absolute minimum of airside property and runway area possible. This makes your dollars and revenue base go as far as they can while maintaining the best balance of facility relative to the demands which will be placed upon it. If nonaeronautical land develops swiftly, this acceptance will have a positive impact on the airport portion of the property.

One use which can potentially utilize an airbases' inherent capacities is the "all-cargo" or "industrial airport". Although the theory behind this concept is a good one, the practical reality is that it is very difficult to promote these facilities without the prior commitment from a large user willing to go in immediately and operate cargo aircraft at the facility. If a commitment can be obtained in advance, this can have a major impact on the success of the facility. However, if a "operate it and they will come" approach is taken, a fledgling airport authority can wait a long time. Pre-leasing any element of the airport is a good idea. As part of the planning process, a certain amount of effort and activity should revolve around finding tenants for any and all aspects of the property in advance of the day the government turns the keys over to you. This pre-leasing activity can pay dividends when the beast is finally all yours, and you are under pressure to maximize revenues and keep costs down.